



INFORMATION CAPSULE

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RESEARCH ON THE BENEFITS OF RECESS

At a Glance

This Information Capsule summarizes the findings of studies that have been conducted on recess in elementary schools. Researchers have concluded that recess benefits all aspects of children's development – physical, intellectual, social, and emotional. In addition, time spent in recess does not appear to adversely affect students' academic performance. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds may be most affected by the reduction or elimination of recess.

Most experts agree that allowing elementary students to engage in unstructured and child-directed play is important for their learning and development. Studies conducted on recess have reached the following conclusions:

- **Many U.S. elementary schools have reduced or eliminated recess in order to make time for more instruction in academic subjects** (Society of Health and Physical Education, 2015; Pellegrini & Bohn-Gettler, 2013; Alvarado, 2012; Dills et al., 2011; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). Murray and Ramstetter (2013) questioned the wisdom of this practice. They stated, “[M]inimizing or eliminating recess may be counterproductive to academic achievement, as a growing body of evidence suggests that recess promotes not only physical health and social development but also cognitive performance.”
- **Research suggests that recess can play an important role in the educational experience of elementary school students** (Rose, 2016; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2013; Pellegrini & Bohn-Gettler, 2013; Alvarado, 2012; Reed et al., 2010; Jarrett, 2002).
 - Studies have found that recess leads to increases in students' attention, concentration, and on-task classroom behavior (Society of Health and Physical Education, 2015; Murray & Ramstetter, 2013; Alvarado, 2012; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009; Pellegrini & Bohn, 2008).
 - Research has determined that optimal cognitive processing depends on regular breaks from classroom work. Studies have found that elementary school children comprehend material more thoroughly and quickly when it is presented with short breaks. The provision of short breaks has also been linked to improvements in

students' memory, productivity, and classroom behavior (Murray & Ramstetter, 2013; Pellegrini & Bohn-Gettler, 2013; Dills et al., 2011; Reed et al., 2010; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009).

- A nationwide Gallup poll of elementary school principals revealed that the majority of respondents reported that recess had a positive impact on students' academic achievement (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2010).
- Some researchers caution that although recess may have some short-term positive effects on students' academic performance, more studies are needed to determine if recess has a long-term impact on student achievement (Alvarado, 2012; Singh et al., 2012).
- **Time spent in recess and physical education classes does not adversely affect students' academic performance** (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010; Robert Woods Johnson Foundation, 2010; Reed et al., 2010; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009; Trost, 2009). For example, a study conducted by Dills and colleagues (2011) used a nationally representative sample of elementary school students to measure the effects of recess and physical education on reading and mathematics test scores. Findings indicated that even though the provision of recess and physical education resulted in reduced academic instructional time, it did not negatively affect students' test scores. The researchers concluded that gains in student concentration compensated for the time spent in physical, instead of academic, activities.
- **Providing recess to students on a regular basis promotes their physical fitness.** Studies have found that inactivity is associated with childhood obesity and increases in health problems such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol (Rose, 2016; Texas State Health Advisory Committee, 2014; Murray & Ramstetter, 2013; Pellegrini & Bohn-Gettler, 2013; Alvarado, 2012; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010; Reed et al., 2010; Jarrett, 2002).
- **Recess promotes students' social and emotional development.** Through unstructured play at recess, students are provided with opportunities to learn communication, conflict resolution, problem-solving, and negotiation skills (Texas State Health Advisory Committee, 2014; Murray & Ramstetter, 2013; Pellegrini & Bohn-Gettler, 2013; Alvarado, 2012; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009).
- **Physical education (PE) courses are not a substitute for recess.** Although both PE and recess provide opportunities for physical play outside of the classroom, they serve different purposes. PE classes provide a structured setting, with students receiving adult-directed instruction in physical activities, games, health, and fitness. In contrast, recess activities are child-directed, unstructured, and provide students with the opportunity to play creatively (Murray & Ramstetter, 2013; Pellegrini & Bohn-Gettler,

2013; Alvarado, 2012; Dills et al., 2011; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009).

- **Children from disadvantaged backgrounds appear to be most affected by the reduction or elimination of recess in elementary schools.** Barros and colleagues (2009) noted that these children are often unable to safely engage in unstructured play in their neighborhoods. Recess may therefore be their only opportunity to participate in the type of creative and child-directed play that promotes their physical, social, and emotional development.

Summary

This Information Capsule summarized the findings of studies conducted on the impact of recess on elementary school students. Research suggests that recess plays an important role in the educational experience of elementary school students. In addition, providing recess to students on a regular basis promotes their physical fitness, as well as their social and emotional development. Studies have also found that the time spent in recess does not negatively affect students' academic performance. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds may be most affected by the reduction or elimination of recess.

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